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But while one may question the wisdom of his party's decision to join the electoral mainstream and adhere to constitutional norms (an overemphasis on which seems to have blunted its earlier revolutionary edge as an opponent of the Establishment), one must acknowledge that among its leaders, Nagbhushan was one of the first to identify the new danger that was beginning to threaten the entire Left movement from the late 1980s onwards. In the face of the deadly challenge posed by the Hindu communal forces, Nagbhushan not only intensified his efforts to bring together the scattered revolutionary groups, but also extended his call for unity to all the parliamentary Leftist parties to fight the saffron brigade. It is significant that his last public speech, a few weeks before his death, was delivered at the opening session of the CPI's 17th Party Congress at Chennai. Here he drew the attention of the delegates to the futility of experimenting with United Fronts with disparate parties subscribing to opportunist agendas, and warned them against joining the Congress chariot as an alternative. He then stressed the need to unite the Left's own forces against the "saffron brigade in power", and reiterated the proposal of his party, the CPI(M-L), to form a broad-based Left confederation rooted in a common programme of struggle. Describing the importance of political co-operation among all sections of the Left as the "primary agenda" today, he appealed to them to march together with "mutual respect" and strike with all their combined strength against the common enemy.

We earnestly hope that Nagbhushan's last appeal does not remain a voice in the wilderness. It is about time that the Indian Left, ranging from the various armed naxalite groups to the parliamentary parties, realise the urgent need to stop mutual recriminations and close their ranks to fight the communal menace that poses the gravest threat today to their plans of bringing about a socialist and democratic order in India.

KERALA

Literary Style of Politics

K Haridas

The action of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi in seeking to revitalise a declining Hindu ritual by organising a 'Vidyarambham' ceremony in its premises has to be seen in the context of the emergent political currents and trends in the state.

THE Pooja day celebration in Kerala became notable this year thanks to the decision of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi to conduct a 'Vidyarambham' ceremony in its premises. About 600 children intoned the sacred words 'Hari Sree' that are supposed to throw open to them the world of learning. What drew attention to the event was not so much the introduction of a hitherto non-existent practice by the Akademi as the protest that it evoked from some quarters. The organisation of rationalists conducted a dharna before the Akademi office even as the function was being conducted. A dalit cultural forum resorted to a more strident form of protest by burning the effigy of M T Vasudevan Nair, the Akademi president and Jnanpith award winning writer.

The protesters were seeking to highlight what they regard as the process of communalisation of the Akademi. Why, they ask, should the Hindu way of beginning one's education be adopted by the Akademi, the official literary establishment of the secular state? The office-bearers of the Akademi on the other hand sought to argue that the ceremony organised by them had to be viewed in a broad cultural perspective. To emphasise their point, the organisers had ensured the presence of noted Hindu, Muslim and Christian writers to represent the three major religions of the state.

The polemic between the proponents of pure art and the votaries of the social purpose of art has always been alive and active in Kerala. (That in spite of the passionate arguments of the latter school not many Malayalam writers of repute belong to the realm of socialist realism is a different story.) By conducting the 'Vidyarambham' ceremony this year, the stalwarts of the Sahitya Akademi may have unwittingly confirmed one of the often repeated arguments of the leftists in this polemics – that ideas are born not out of the enlightenment of a few blessed ones but from the concrete conditions of human existence. It does not require much wisdom to locate the roots of the Akademi's decision to sanctify a Hindu cultural practice.

Hindutva organisations in the state have an alert propaganda machine, though popular support for the BJP has not been sufficient so far for the party to win a single seat in the state assembly. But in an achievement of sorts, the BJP did poll around 9 per cent of the valid votes in the last Lok Sabha election. This represents significant growth for a political outfit which, in its then incarnation as the Jan Sangh, had been unable to muster even 1 per cent of the votes in the first election to the state assembly in 1957. In addition to the religious propaganda all over the country, the demise of the international socialist bloc has contributed to this growth in recent years. The hope in the future that the communist movement had kept alive by highlighting the achievements of the socialist countries is no more. The void is being filled by the propaganda of religion-based politics. The leadership tussle in the state unit of the CPI(M) and the corrupt practices seen among a section of the party rank and file only strengthen this process. The communist movement is now a remote attraction for idealist youth. In this scenario, talk of infusing moral values into politics through religious teachings and invocation of the cultural roots of national pride have begun to exercise a strong pull. The effect is visible in all fields of social activity. In popular films the adored hero sacrifices his life in defence of traditional family values, in literature nostalgia for the feudal era with its assumed identities and privileges is overpowering and in politics there is the quest for the incorruptible and able leader.

It is not difficult to see the link, howsoever subliminal, between these developments and the Sahitya Akademi's action. The great literary figures of the Akademi may be away from the hurly-burly of day-to-day politics, but their contention that the ceremony organised by the Akademi had nothing to do with politics is far from convincing. Talk of culture or the nation may be used to conceal politics, as was sought to be done after the nuclear explosions when national honour was invoked to adorn the 'Hindu bomb'. It is worth remembering that a leading Malayalam writer publicly proclaimed her jubilation over the nuclear explosions by cooking 'payasam'. Now cooking 'payasam' is not politics, but the message sought to be conveyed was clearly political. The same is true of the organising of a religious ceremony in the garb of culture by the state literary body.

Many Malayali children, Hindu children included, begin their education without the ritual of 'Vidyarambham', both in Kerala and outside. What prompted the Sahitya Akademi to focus on a dwindling practice in its own premises? The decision was not an innocuous one. The make-belief that Hindu practices and rituals are secular is dangerous. The debate now centres on the propriety of the protesters having burnt the effigy of a reputed writer like M T Vasudevan Nair. This debate can go on, but the political questions raised by the whole episode cannot be wished away. The champions of secularism cannot avoid facing them.

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